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ABSTRACT

In this address, the Executive Director of The Higher Learning Commission ("Commission") shares his thoughts about the renovation of the Commission as it prepares for the future. The Commission is an organization of great integrity, which has worked for successful renewal in the past, and on this basis it will be possible to build the next project of the Commission, that of rewriting its accreditation standards. The Commission is aware that the standards it creates will not serve for the next century; it hopes they will be useful for the next decade. The leadership, commitment, and openness that are apparent in this renovation project give confidence that the standards that are developed will be the best they can be, and the Commission will be able to move on to new challenges, including reducing confidentiality in its future actions. (SLD)

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Engaging the Future by Restructuring Expectations

July 1, 2002
The Higher Learning Commission

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Engaging the Future by Restructuring Expectations

Let me add my welcome to those you have heard from my friends on the podium this late afternoon. I've lived in Chicago long enough to know that I do not apologize for its weather. Being from Chicago means you never have to say you are sorry about whatever is happening outside. Personally, however, I am sorry that we're just about a week or two early for the bulb show that will brilliantly color our urban flowerboxes and parks. We are, thanks to a mayor concerned about appearances, a downright lovely city once the sleet and snow end and a good spring rain washes away the thin white coat of salt dust!

It is a singular honor—and great personal pleasure—to share in the leadership of this organization at this particular time in its history. I could make much of the myriad numbers of changes we have been making recently: new corporate structure; new name and new logo so visible throughout this meeting; and new statements of mission, vision, and values to name the most obvious. But we have no time to rest on the achievements of the recent past, for more changes are ahead.

To hold together my brief comments today, I want to use a construction metaphor. Here in the city I live in a neighborhood experiencing massive gentrification. Perhaps that explains why I find this metaphor so powerful for me. When I moved into the area now called North Center over 15 years ago, it didn't have a recognizable neighborhood name. It was showing clear signs of decline perhaps symbolized by the shop a block from me with its windows filled with spider webs and old, but repaired, typewriters. The three German restaurants a couple of blocks from my house testified to the ethnic, working class neighborhood it had once been. None, by the way, still exist. Small frame family homes that once were filled with young families and children lined most of the neighborhood streets. A nearby strip along the commuter railroad lines contained outdated manufacturing plants on both sides, once the source of work for those families. Well, today not only have we lost the German restaurants, we find almost weekly another frame house being torn down to be replaced by three-unit condos. The old typewriter store is gone as is the building it was in, and 35 new condo units are now for sale in a massive new structure that changes my urban landscape. Barely a block away, another 15-20 condos are on the market in a building that replaced the big thrift shop. And so it goes.

From watching what is going on around me, I have to question frequently what fundamental vision and values inform the developers, builders, and renovators who are redoing my neighborhood right now. Is the neighborhood being rebuilt for the future or just in response to the market of the day? Will the new half million dollar townhouses actually sell and fill or stand as monuments to greed? It appears to me that we are rapidly pricing housing beyond the means of almost everyone who once made this urban community vital. Multi-level townhouses appear not to be the most appropriate for an aging population. Willy-nilly we appear to be changing the business community—national chains create lovely stores while many small independent stores close, upscale restaurants and fast foods operations move in to harvest the market once served by the good family restaurants no longer in business. I keep wondering whether all of these changes will serve the population well in the next twenty years. Will they be in place in fifty years, or will the neighborhood have experienced the upheavals of another period of ripping down and rebuilding, of replacement rather than renewal?

I argue that what the Commission is about is a major renovation project, not—as we in the Chicago housing market know all too well—a tear-down and complete rebuild. Any good renovation project, I believe, requires a good recognition of the integrity of the building being remodeled—you can remodel because of that integrity. Any good renovation project tries to bridge creatively what existed and what the remodeled structure will become. And the very best renovation projects try to anticipate the future, designing into the renovation possibilities for future renovation and change. In short, the goal is to have a revitalized structure with great integrity. I think I know what I am talking about simply from my own experience. I moved into a house built probably at the turn of the century, but with jerrybuilt add-ons and poorly conceived renovations. Or so it became clear to me about three weeks after I moved in and in

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one of Chicago's major rainstorms, I lost one ceiling! You get the point, I think.

My first very basic point: we have an organization with great integrity. This organization has an exemplary history of creating and recreating its work to fit changing environments. Leadership, of course, has played a major role in all of this, but I have argued in other settings that something equally profound is quite literally built into our foundation. When challenged by other regional agencies that seem to have a strong sense of the uniqueness of their cultural geographies, I have suggested that our culture has been shaped by an historical commitment to make quality higher education accessible to the people who lived in this broad, widespread region. Perhaps the land-grant universities and their missions shaped this culture, but so also did the founding fathers and mothers of private colleges created to provide educational opportunities to widely scattered communities. Whatever the forces, I have heard time and again within this organization voices speaking on behalf of accepting experimentation and innovation in order to assure student access to quality learning.

We can thank others for ensuring the integrity of the organization. The honorary members we have introduced all made important decisions meant to keep this house of accreditation working and up-to-date. I think particularly of my predecessor Patsy Thrash who with her board—and both Glenn Niemeyer and Jack Bottenfield were key figures on that board in the 1990s—went through trying times a decade ago when regional accreditation was thought by some to be of limited value and probably irrelevant to the changes then beginning to reshape higher education. They agreed to strengthen the organization's staff and physical presence—in a sense, completing a three-decade-long process of professionalizing a completely voluntary organization. They strengthened accreditation processes in order to prove to some skeptics that rigor and accountability had neither left our organizational vocabulary nor our actual accrediting activities. Moreover, just on the eve of Patsy's departure they implemented a seminal period of self-review fundamental to our capacity to be where we are today. To continue the metaphor I started: to ensure the integrity of the structure in the 1990s, walls were rearranged, we had a complete refurnishing, and architects had been hired to draw up plans for a potential major renovation.

When the Committee on Organizational Effectiveness and Future Directions began its work in 1997, our current period of renovation began. The mission revision project of 1999-2000 was the first stage. We are now well into the next stages of the project. Everyone who has ever lived through a major house renovation knows the excitement and frustration of such an endeavor. Remember when the renovators warned you that until they knew what was behind the walls, they couldn't really tell you the scope of the work? Well, we have had the good fortune to have a structure of great integrity, readily adaptable for conversion and adaptation. Remember when the builders suggested that you might want to modify your plans in the middle of the work, thereby adding to your budgets? Well, we've experienced the underestimated costs of "re-branding," the unexpected costs of deciding to design and integrate new technologies into the project, and the under-budgeted costs of maintaining the new structure with all of its enhanced services. To be sure, we have been the beneficiaries of $1.5 million from the Pew Charitable Trusts that has underwritten some of the riskiest and most experimental aspects of the renovation. While that money has given us the capacity to be far more adventurous than any of us anticipated just four years ago, we cannot fail to build into the structure that we're creating the design and engineering lessons learned through AQIP.

It is from this perspective that I ask your assistance in the next major renovation project of the Commission: rewriting its accreditation standards. As you can tell from my previous discussion, I have chosen the term "renovation" with some care. We are continuing the long and successful history in the Commission of recognizing and responding to changes in our institutions and in the social and political contexts in which they exist. But I want to propose today that if the Commission is going to be successful in "engaging the future," of preparing for its preferred future, this renovation project might need to be as thorough and foresighted as the one that marked the organization in the early '30s when the Commission dropped absolute numerical standards and began to focus on institutional mission, and the one in the '50s and early '60s when the Commission moved to our current practice of periodic re-evaluation through the use of on-site peer review teams. Renovation, to be sure, but no small plans, these.

Of all of the changes that are part of our efforts to equip the Commission to be a 21st century quality assurance organization, the rewriting of standards is perhaps the most interesting and most challenging. We know that we are not creating standards that will serve throughout the new century. I hope they will prove to be useful for the next decade. But we also know that whatever we do now will have a major impact on the capacity of those who follow us to continue to make regional institutional accreditation vital and valued. We do an inadequate piece of renovation now, and the only response of our successors will be to rip out all of our hard work and build anew. In short, we build for the future knowing full well that future renovations must take place. We must create

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a structure that will make those renovations relatively easy to make.

I fully appreciate that in the writing of standards, we should expect some significant disagreements over what those standards should and must include. Writing standards, after all, is a political process through which multiple interests seek to shape the outcome when they consider the outcome actually to be important. Faculty unions will watch with some care to see whether accrediting standards support or threaten faculty interests. Trustee organizations have already proposed how the standards should further their agenda to strengthen good practices in board governance. All institutions will want to guard against standards that appear to add cost without adding any clear educational value. Most will be concerned whether new standards might allow into membership organizations not as highly invested in physical and human resources as they are. Public policy makers ought to worry whether the new standards seem credible, relevant, and responsive to new pressures for accountability. My nightmare is not that we have disagreements but that we meet with disinterest and apathy. My other nightmare is that we fail to be far-sighted enough in our thinking, and design such obsolescence into the organization that it actually fails to meet any important needs in the future.

I draw confidence from the leadership of the Board of this organization. In approving this project, "Restructuring Expectations: Accreditation 2004," they made it clear that, in the great tradition of the Commission, this new set of standards must allow for the inclusion of new and transforming organizations engaged in providing higher learning. I also draw confidence from the framework we have already established through our new statements of mission, vision, and values. We are about the business of creating standards that will let us live up to what we say about ourselves. We have committed this organization and its work to "serving the common good." Standards and process that appear to exist only to be self-serving to colleges and universities simply will not meet the test of fulfilling our mission. We claim as fundamental values commitments to inclusiveness, diversity, and innovation. Standards that restrict reasonable flexibility in their interpretation and implementation simply will not measure up to those values. We envision ourselves as a model of effective quality assurance. I quote from our vision statement:

> [The Commission will conduct] its work with such openness, excellence, and integrity that it earns a national and international reputation for leadership in defining quality in the rapidly changing education marketplace.

Standards that are so vague as to invite lack of consistent interpretation and rigorous application won't testify to success in living up to this vision. This is not the place to go through all of the points made in the Commission's vision and values statements, but I fully expect that before we finally adopt new standards, the Board and staff will explicitly measure them against these statements.

I also draw confidence from the openness of this renovation process. This organization has been communicating with its membership frequently after the major 1996 survey that gained an amazing 91% response rate. All of you were asked in multiple ways to contribute to the mission project of 1999-2000. Each annual meeting over the past few years has involved special sessions during which Board members interacted with all who accepted the invitation to share ideas. In this current process we have to date involved over sixty people directly in design groups and electronic work groups, we have met with scores of interested people in three regional meetings, and we again devote several sessions in this meeting to hearing from you. Although I was confident that the use of the web would create even more opportunities for response, I am learning that real engagement requires more than easy access to information. So we will continue to find ways to gain attention that involve a rich variety of stakeholders into these vitally important discussions. This will include yet another set of regional meetings in September.

I draw confidence from my sense that even as we open up the possibilities for new types of organizations to achieve accreditation, we are becoming clearer about what we value in the higher learning opportunities provided in those organizations. In short, instead of focusing so much on structures and resources, we can focus on what it is that separates higher learning from multiple other types of learning.

The "Architecture Task Force" (and I realized as I wrote this talk how deeply seated this building metaphor must have been for me when I chose that title) that met in November found itself drawn to the traditional tripartite mission of our universities: teaching, research, and service. Powerfully resonant values, these. Values to be maintained even if in a new structure. Rather quickly in our discussions we began to replace "teaching" with "learning," fully aware that we were doing more than just talking about the other side of the same coin. That led us to find new, more inclusive language for the other parts of that historic mission of higher education: "research" became "discovery," and "service" became "engagement." We actually have Iowa State University, which built on Kellogg Foundation materials, to thank for these important shifts in language. But this was not just an exercise of using a thesaurus. All of us knew the

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revolutionary impact of shifting our institutions from a paradigm of assuring teaching of students to one of assuring student learning. There is equal potential for transformation in emphasizing the role of a higher learning organization in developing in students, faculty, and staff capacity for discovery now and throughout life, and in expecting that an accredited higher learning organization commit to effective linkages between itself and its communities of service. Powerful concepts when restated and recontextualized can help drive necessary transformation. If this is seems obvious to me, it is probably because as a student of the American Revolution, I came to appreciate how in that seminal event American leaders took good English political concepts and refashioned them into a new ideology. I certainly am not suggesting that what we're doing is of such magnitude, but I do think that higher learning in the 21st century will occur in significantly different organizational contexts than it did in the 20th century. We need to be designing and then providing quality assurance that assures the common good by focusing on integrity, effective learning, freedom for discovery, and commitment to connecting higher learning to broad social needs.

Last, but not least, I draw confidence from the fact that we are really renovating. Yes, it appears that the General Institutional Requirements might not survive this process. But the Commission knows that it can provide effective quality assurance through the use of a limited number of broad but targeted criteria supported by thought-provoking patterns of evidence. So at first glance, the renovation might not seem as noticeable as those now occurring in the Southern and Western regional accrediting associations, where a dozen standards are being collapsed into four, or close to five hundred "musts" are being trimmed to about eighty. Moreover, it seems likely to me that we will discover through this project that our next project should be focused on accrediting processes. The Committee on Organizational Effectiveness and Future Directions suggested as much five years ago. Some of our discussions with constituencies within and without the Commission tell us this as well.

I happen to believe that perhaps the biggest challenge we face after adopting new accrediting standards will be tearing down the walls of confidentiality that have so long separated us from a public now wondering what it is we actually do and why we give so little information about what we know. It seems to me that the national higher education community is constantly on the defensive nowadays. So are the regional institutional accrediting associations created by and owned by colleges and universities. We seem to be congenitally incapable of providing clear, crisp descriptions of what we do and why. Simple requests for data are usually met with, "Well it is a very complex situation that makes good data difficult to provide." This is a huge industry, operating in a global setting and absorbing billions and billions of dollars. We cannot get from it consistent information about much of anything, including enrollment demographics, actual costs of educating students, and so forth. Financial audits are not educational audits, and neither are accrediting reports under the current regime of self-regulation, for they are inconsistent in format and content, and private in nature. It's not a viable formula for integrity and accountability in the long run. But this is really about the next set of plans that we must be considering, not the ones we need your help with right now.

As you can tell from these comments, I am confident that we are not inadvertently designing obsolescence into our organization and its work. That is why the invitation for your active participation in this "restructuring" project is so important. Through it we ensure that the Commission is "engaging the future" by serving the common good through creating and implementing credible quality assurance programs for organizations of higher learning.

The Higher Learning Commission

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